

May 6, 1969

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Dear Larry:

I hope you are well settled now, and that you have been able to get some start on your new research in spite of the upheavals all around. Stanford has probably not been much quieter, although the eruptions, by great good fortune and some wisdom and President Pitzer's part, have not cut so deeply into the life of the community.

I have, I am glad to say, been able to take a slightly more active part in the lab work of the group, and Bruce Brandt is a pleasure to have here. Nevertheless, the atmosphere won't be the same in your absence and I am confounded by regrets over not having somehow found much more time than I did to communicate with you while you were here, at the same time that I regret that it is now even so much more difficult.

That leads me to what may be the main point of this note, which was provoked by some reflections on our uncertainties as to future directions in the organization of the school. Arthur Kornberg, as you know, was imminent, is retiring as head of the Biochemistry Department and will be taking a sabbatical in the Chemistry Department before returning after a while. Paul Berg is taking over as Acting Head, and the question is somewhat in limbo as to whether he would prefer to be confirmed in that position or to start off on a new department of regulatory cell biology which has been approved in principle by the Executive Committee. Similarly, Norman Kretchmer is quitting in Pediatrics and will be starting a new department in human developmental biology. Perhaps the most interesting development from an educational point of view is a program in human biology as an undergraduate major, which is summarized in the enclosure. This still has to wait for actual funding from the Ford Foundation, but that does seem very likely.

Against that background it seemed to me that I should not keep too rigid a view as to what the purposes and directions of this department might be, particularly in the event that some of the professors now here should decide to leave. My most immediate concern there is that Walter has been offered a very attractive position as Professor of Genetics at Oxford, and it is a reasonable possibility that he might decide to take it.

*Handwritten signature:*  
Lawrence M. Okun

I only mention all this to give you the background of rethinking rather than to suggest that there are any immediate concrete steps that have to be taken. But in that kind of thinking I was moved to consider for the first time in quite a while who might be some of the people that I would like to see come to Stanford, and I could not help but think about yourself with a very deep sense of positive anticipation. I guess all I would like to ask of you right now is to keep me closely informed about your future plans, and give me a chance to discuss the possibility of your taking an appointment here before you commit yourself irrevocably anywhere else. As far as I am concerned the subject matter of your research interests would be quite immaterial to an appointment in this department, and you know that I have the utmost regard for your general intellectual outlook and that I would simply want to give you the utmost support for any line of work that you choose to pursue.

While I am at it, let me also suggest that if there is any good purpose to be served by your spending any limited period of time back here even before you complete your postdoctoral training, I would be more than happy to try to see how to help manage it.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

P.S. While foraging around for my column I did stumble into the issue of genetic effects of chlorination, and find a very large number of fascinating problems at every level that we are starting to incorporate into our lab program. In particular, the organic analysis and instrumentation group has a place to fit into our genetic studies such that all of the previous work in setting it up seems to have been anticipatory to meet this particular challenge.